Opinion
Guest Voices

A gray wolf is pictured at rest. The Anishinaabe word for wolf means "one who shows the way." (Gary Kramer/United States Fish and Wildlife Service)

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On the northern edge of the Great Lakes Basin, the earth has turned to iron, trees are shed of leaves, and carpets of snow and ice cover miles of desolate forests, rocky coastlines and dense cedar swamps. The earth is cold here. Barren. Deer huddle together under low-lying branches. An ominous stillness hovers in the darkness. The Anishinaabe, Indigenous peoples of this region, call these midwinter days the "time of the Hunger Moon."

Near a cabin north of the small community where I live with my family, years ago I placed a small statue of St. Francis of Assisi in a grove of birch trees. Next to a cliff overlooking Lake Superior, it remains there, partially buried among snow drifts. Tonight, on a forested ridge above, there are other signs of shadowed life, leaving marks between tree lines: occasional, scattered tracks of a gray wolf.

In far-off cities, rural villages and rarified enclaves of the world's powerful elite, an insatiable hunger from another predator haunts us — SARS-CoV-2, its viral terror continuing to shape international political and economic life in ways unimagined. We are on a search for salvation from our dilemma, looking for something more than a return to normal. The world as we knew it brought us here. We hunger for deeper meaning. A better way forward.

In this lonely corner of North America, against the backdrop of COVID-19, ours is a prescient moment to recognize modernity's tragic loss of spiritual relationships to the natural world. And the long-term consequences that trigger the emergence of lethal, drug-resistant infectious diseases.

Controversy about the gray wolf (*Canis lupus*), now threatened in Michigan's forests, offers us specific clues to such hidden connections. It also raises a time-critical challenge: to develop, then implement a new, science-based, spiritually informed environmental ethic, one that could rescue our planet, which has exceeded, by all measures, her own carrying capacity.

For Indigenous peoples of the Great Lakes Basin, including Lake Superior, shown here, midwinter is the "time of the Hunger Moon." (Courtesy of Cedar Tree Institute)

Lessons from wolves

Stopping by a roadside antique shop in a small Upper Peninsula hamlet a year ago last January, shortly before the beginning of the pandemic, I spent time looking over a rusty link of chain attached to a set of steel jaws hanging from a ceiling post. A tag read, "Wolf Trap: $50." My wife looked at it, then remarked, "I don't really want this in our home." We moved on to the secondhand glass and dish displays.

The dilapidated steel trap was a relic from the past. It also carried a warning of what might be coming. In Michigan, legal protection of gray wolves has been part of our political landscape for close to 50 years. The U.S. Endangered Species Act, originally passed in 1973, initially provided federal protection. Under that legislation, any trapping of wolves in the Great Lakes Basin was forbidden.

Things have changed. On Nov. l, that protective measure was removed by federal executive order. Oversight has now been shifted to the state which, if historical precedent holds, will bend to open hunting seasons under pressure from powerful lobbying groups.

In the early 19th century, ranching, agriculture, and sheep herding spread across the country. Wolf bounties appeared on the nation's frontier and eventually became popular across North America. For a number of prominent families that shaped the timber and mining industries in northern Michigan, wolf hunts became outdoor adventures of the privileged class.

A hunting lodge scene circa 1920s, featuring a rack of wolves that have been shot (Courtesy of Marquette Regional History Center)

By the 1960s, the gray wolf population in the northern Great Lakes Basin was nearly extinct. In 1989, official reports identified a single breeding pair left in Michigan.

Thanks to strategic reintroduction of the species by conservation groups and years of protection provided by the Endangered Species Act, there are currently 695 to 700 wolves in Michigan's Upper Peninsula.

Proponents of protective measures point to gray wolves' critical role in maintaining environmental balance, especially the elimination of the weak and sick among white-tailed deer, now estimated to number over 250,000 in a region roughly the size of Rhode Island. Overabundance of deer populations, we have learned, leads to disease, starvation and, most recently, unchecked spread of viral and bacterial infections.

Wolves play a key role in this equation as natural predators. Hunters prefer healthy bucks as trophy and venison sources. With the loss of the healthiest of the white-tailed deer population, we have come to learn the gene pool is diminished. Disease and infection flourish.

Overcoming the nature-culture divide

The role that gray wolves currently play in Michigan's heated political landscape is complex. It exposes a split between nature and human consciousness. Sightings of wolves in their natural habitat are rare. Gray wolves can be heard, their tracks traced, but their elusive, silent presence continues to contribute to legend and popular myth.

Actual destruction of domestic livestock by wolves is minimal in the northern Great Lakes Basin. If and when such incidents occur, they have immediately been addressed under specific provisions in the Endangered Species Act, ensuring prompt removal of rogue wolves by state wildlife authorities.

Thanks to movie directors and the public's need for drama, emotion-charged conversations about wolves reflect serious divisions between fantasy and reality. Threats to human life, evidence shows, are based on anecdote and fiction. In recent decades, we've learned that the virtual world is, for human sensibility, preferable for its predictability and exaggeration.

Joe Carnahan's 2011 feature film "The Grey," with Liam Neeson, is a splendid example. The movie is about a group of men in Alaska after a plane crash. They are stalked by wolves. One by one, hunted down. It's a gripping story. But audiences need to be reminded: Wolves in this film were computer-generated images that dwarf, in both size and ferocity, any resemblance to actual gray wolves.

More important and insightful information on relationships between wolves and human communities can be found, not from Hollywood, but in Native American spiritual teachings of the Great Lakes Basin.

Wolves help control populations of deer, like this white-tailed doe, in the Great Lakes Basin. (Wikimedia Commons/GregOberski, CC BY-SA 4.0)

According to Ojibwe tradition, the wolf was given as a gift by the Creator to the first humans. The gray wolf came to serve as a helpful brother — in the Anishinaabe language, "*ma'iingan*," or "one who shows the way." Such designations are rooted in a sacramental understanding of the world.

It is no surprise, then, that in 2016, the 12 federally recognized tribes in Michigan took an official position (United Tribes of Michigan Resolution #036-02-11-2015) against efforts to open up any seasonal hunting of their "brother" wolf across North America. This heartfelt concern, like many others brought to light by Indigenous leaders, continues, for the most part, to be summarily dismissed by more powerful drivers of popular American politics.

The price of environmental destruction

The current pandemic sweeping the planet is brutally bringing us back home to an understanding of the consequences of not supporting healthy ecological integrity. There is a price we have paid for disrupting natural systems of self-regulation. COVID-19 has become a lethal teacher.

Laurie Garrett, a Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter and researcher, is one of the authorities on the current spread of SARS-CoV-2. She was among the first to paint the fascinating, chilling picture of our overconfidence in modern science and the complex dynamics that we are discovering shape the natural world's microbial life.

In *The Coming Plague: Newly Emerging Diseases in a World out of Balance* (1994), she writes that the spread of lethal viruses like HIV, Marburg virus disease, and Ebola are ecological paybacks for human behavior, flawed technology and the destruction of natural ecosystems that hold all systems of microbial life in balance.

Rapid growth of our planet's population, along with unchecked human drives for political dominance and resource consumption, have, Garrett writes, "put every measurable biological and chemical system on earth in a state of imbalance."

She details the amplifiers of lethal viruses and bacteria, how the vast majority are a direct result of human pride and arrogance: Relentless destruction of wilderness areas that hold viruses "in check." Urbanization of the world's human population, where over 2 billion people have no clean water or sanitation. Overuse of antibiotics in agriculture and farming. A blood bank industry which, driven by profit, sacrifices appropriate monitoring of donated plasma. Lack of medical care for the poor, leading to the use of contaminated syringes. The spread of viral disease in understaffed and underfunded hospitals in underdeveloped countries exploited for their natural resources.

The path of St. Francis

Ours is a time for new vision. Deep within the best of the world's great religious myths and traditions, there are clues, hope for an ecological reset. One is found in a legend of St. Francis of Assisi, the patron saint of animals and ecology.

It's said that in Italy, not long before the horror of global plague (the Black Death) swept over Europe in the 14th century, the town of Gubbio faced a challenge. A rogue wolf was destroying livestock in the region. People were terrified. The wolf was blamed for the death of several villagers. In their fear and confusion, Gubbio's citizens turned upon one another.

Francis was called to help. It was known, legend says, that he had a special gift. He could talk with animals. At first, the story goes, the wolf growled at Francis, prepared to attack him. Francis made the sign of the cross, then became aware that the animal was partly crippled and starving.

It's said that he helped make arrangements for the villagers to feed the wolf. The wolf, in gratitude, agreed to protect the townsfolk. A relationship emerged, grounded in compassion. A new harmony was established, based on respect, a meeting of mutual needs.

A statue on the grounds of the National Shrine of St. Maximilian Kolbe, in Libertyville, Illinois, depicts St. Francis of Assisi taming the wolf of Gubbio. (CNS/Bob Roller)

In the winter of 2013, I helped coordinate a group of university students for an interfaith environmental initiative in northern Michigan involving 10 faith traditions. That spring, Jorge Mario Bergoglio became the 266th pope of the Roman Catholic Church. He chose the name Francis I.

One student I was working with was from the Roman Catholic tradition, a young man considering vocation to the priesthood. Weeks later, upon graduation from the university, he presented me with a thank-you note. With it was a small gift card from a church supply store, imprinted with a traditional prayer. On the other side was an image of St. Francis of Assisi. Sitting at St. Francis's feet was a wolf, poised, calm, at peace.

Early this summer, I attended Tom's ordination at our local cathedral. He now serves a small parish in the remote Keweenaw Peninsula, not far from an Indian reservation located on the shores of Lake Superior.

The critical, important message that Laurie Garrett brings, along with others from laboratories of molecular and microbial research, is this: Vaccines and social distancing will not save us from our more serious planetary crisis. Garrett warns us that the world will continue to be fraught with disorder and hundreds of millions of deaths due to mutant viruses, unless we recognize and address the need to protect the planet's ecological integrity.

Those of us in faith communities have a vital role to play. Lifting up a vision of hope through rituals and songs, poems and prayers, we can choose intentional roles as caretakers and stewards, not simply consumers, in a greater divine order.

Humbled by a broken economy and widespread global illness, we can learn together, in deeper, more sophisticated ways, how to live within the limits of our natural world with increased gratitude and grace. We can begin to befriend, in more insightful ways, the Earth and the integrity of her waters, forests, plants and wildlife.

The journey will be hard. Time is short. On a cliff edge tonight, a small statue, covered with snow, is still visible. On the ridge above, a shadowed figure whom the Ojibwe call *ma'iingan* roams, elusive, mysterious, under a hunger moon.

Let them carry our prayers. It may be the wolves and saints, not vaccines and politicians, who hold the real keys to a message that comes to save us all.

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